The Host of the Dead

By Curt Rowlett

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It was surely October
On this very night of last year
That I journeyed, I journeyed down here
That I brought a dread burden down here
On this night of all nights in the year,
Oh, what demon has tempted me here?

From the poem, *Ulalume*, by Edgar Allan Poe

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Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping
than you can understand.

From the poem, *The Stolen Child*, by W.B. Yeats

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The Gothic fragment is a type of Gothic fiction characterized by short, atmospheric stories with abrupt beginnings and ends, and narratives driven by supernatural motifs without explanation.

From a Wikipedia entry on *Gothic Literature*

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There was no possibility that he was going to make it to Manchester before nightfall.

He had been walking since early morning, but a serious misjudgment of his own ability to work his way on foot over the rough terrain of the desolate moor was slowly dawning on him. Added to this realization were the twin burdens of his backpack and the lingering sadness he felt.

The pack was a problem because it slowed his pace, though he knew it was a necessity, as the things that it held were vital for the difficulties he faced on such a long hike. And now, observing what was certainly a nasty storm brewing over the Yorkshire moors, he knew instinctively that the load was an essential one.

The other burden was his emotional state, a persistent unhappiness, something intangible that he was finding to be just as difficult to carry around. It was there, as a weight on his heart and mind, not unlike

a load in any pack. It had accompanied him, along with its miserable contents, on his trip over from his home in the United States.

He was relying on the backpack to make his journey less difficult and he bore that burden willingly; the other load was something that he was hoping to lose by increments on this hike through the glorious English countryside.

Catharsis, he thought to himself, as he continued along the hiking path.

Both of those factors were unquestionably parts of his present problem. And both created their own particular kind of difficulties. But he tried to put those two things out of his mind, as he now realized that there was a third, more immediate concern at the moment: the inclement weather.

Because the fact of the matter was he had not fully appreciated just how quickly things could change for the worse out there on the moors. What started out as a perfectly fine, though slightly cool, spring morning, had suddenly turned unquestionably bleak by late afternoon. After only hours into his walk, a cold, biting north wind had begun to blow across the moor, quickly chilling him, while driving ominous-looking weather before it, the lowering clouds appearing now in threatening shades of gray and black. And he could even see a splash of purple now where huge thunderheads were starting to form. As he watched, there were periodic flashes of lightening off in the distance and he thought he could hear deep rumbles of thunder over the moaning of the icy wind.

He understood, both from the knowledge gained through books, and now from this moment of personal happenstance, that this combination of brutal wind and weather is where the old Yorkshire colloquialism “wuthering” had certainly come from.

He had started this journey from the small village of Meltham. He was looking to enjoy the beauty of hiking through the wild country here in West Yorkshire. Inwardly, he was hoping that he could perhaps manage to find some sort of emotional release that would help ease those troubles that he carried with him, like so much bulky luggage that a person cannot seem to break free of.

He had stayed overnight at a B&B in Meltham, leaving soon after breakfast to hike to the start of the walking path at the edge of Wessenden Moor. His original plan was to walk all of the way through to Saddleworth Moor and then, try to make the rest of the way into Manchester by the main road, a total distance of roughly twenty-plus miles. Barring that, he hoped to find another bed and breakfast along the way where he could stay for the night, as he had not planned to overnight on the moor, nor had he brought along a proper tent.

And even though he felt the pressure to complete this journey on time, he had paused at the top of each steep rise to take in the sheer loveliness of what lay before him. Such beauty as this was unrivaled anywhere, he thought. With the onset of spring, the ling and bell heather in this area had begun to bloom, transforming wide areas of the moor into a purple sea that waved crazily under the relentless wind. The hair-like leaves and silky flower heads of the wavy-hair grass could be seen rippling in the same breeze.

From those vantage points, the scenery had unfolded before his eyes, revealing an area of vast wildness, full of deep green valleys that lay between high craggy hillsides, on which there were

exposed blocks of gray and black stone. Nearby stood small copses of oak, ash, and birch trees where he had earlier caught sight of squirrels at play. He had also heard the call of curlews as they floated high above the heath. And water was abundant everywhere, from large reservoirs to limpid pools to running streams and thundering waterfalls. The bluebells had not flowered yet in this part of the country, he had noted. He had not seen another person since he had started walking.

Earlier in his hike, he had passed along rustic stone walls that ran for miles, and he had even seen a dolmen, one of those ancient burial crypts that the earliest inhabitants of England had constructed from huge quarried stones to serve as chambered tombs for their dead, thousands of years ago. He had stopped to examine it closely. The dolmen had a huge capstone that was supported by five smaller standing stones underneath. An ancient crypt that stood there in the middle of a grassy field, conspicuous amid a herd of sheep grazing near a farmhouse. He had always been interested in the many different kinds of megalithic structures that dotted the landscape of the United Kingdom. He knew from past research that many of the standing stone circles, henges, and huge burial mounds were built on what may have been some kind of mystical power sites or portals that were recognized as such by the original builders.

As he was paused by the dolmen, he leaned against it and took out his water bottle for a drink. Looking around, he continued to marvel at all that he saw. Then he was abruptly filled with such a pure feeling of natural happiness at being outdoors in a place so beautiful that he felt that he wanted his old life to just end right there. *A person's life could not possibly be any better than just being here*, he thought. He quietly murmured aloud, “This kind of beauty is the only thing in life that is really worth selling your soul for. I love these moors. I wish that I could live here forever.” But that was followed just as quickly by a strange thought that said: *Be careful what you wish for. Remember what happened to Dorian Gray*, the central character in Oscar Wilde's dark Gothic tale. He remembered that Dorian Gray was a young man who inadvertently made a Faustian bargain by wishing for eternal youth and beauty, only to unknowingly bind his soul to some unholy power, and paying a horrible price in the end. He smiled inwardly at that, thinking, *this is not the time or place for such morbid thought*. He recapped his water bottle and pushed on, leaving the dolmen behind.

He walked for another hour and paused again to get his bearings. From his present position, he saw that had traveled far enough along the path that he seemed to have left all remnants of human civilization behind him now. The footpath here was less well-defined and he was taking great care to make sure that he stuck to an established route. Because he understood that, for all the natural beauty he beheld, the moors also had their dark side. Among all of the serenity and enchantment, this wild and isolated place held hidden, inherent dangers.

Here a person could get lost amid such vast and unchanging scenery by straying off the path and losing their way. Or, they could trip on rutted ground, tumble off a steep hillside, and break the body beyond repair. Or, worse still, one could blunder unknowingly into wetlands or bogs.

Stumbling into a bog was something that he had been warned about. A rather grizzled old local man that he had spoken with inside a pub in Meltham the night before had described it to him, telling him how walking into a bog at any time of day was something that was highly dangerous; a person could easily fall into a moss-covered bog and there would be nothing to grab onto to get oneself out.

The old man had explained how bogs were a mixture of water, sand, and mud, and were often covered

by thick moss and other vegetation, effectively making them hidden and hard to spot, even in daylight. And, he had continued, they acted the same as quicksand: once caught in the bog's grip, you would slowly sink until you drowned.

“Aye,” the old man had said, in his broad Yorkshire accent, “them moors can be reyt ruthless, mate. If't ta weather doon getcha, t' bogs will. Not sumpin' to be faffin about in, 'specially in the dark.”

And on a more paranormal level, that same old man had also bent his ear about the moors being the historical land of the fae folk. And what he described was definitely not that of the sort of homogenized, Walt Disney, cute-little-winged-pixie-girl types. Rather, he spoke of it as a place that was full of dreadful spirits and ghosts, malevolent fairies, vile hobgoblins, and other rare and unearthly things. He spoke of these as amoral beings that folklore held could be either helpful or harmful to humans. Helpful where, in some occurrences, people who found themselves in danger were given assistance by the fae folk; harmful, as in succumbing to some sort of strange enchantment that would result in an unwitting person being taken away, abducted into the fairy realm, sometimes forever.

“T' worst o' the lot is the *Sluagh na marbh*. They'll steal t' souls o' any they happen upon, but 'ave a rare hanker for them which think they know their own heart's true desire. Nasty work, the Sluagh. We call 'em the *night watch* 'round here,” he said, and took another sip of his pint, giving him a wink over the rim of his glass. “Ya can be sure, them moors are haunted.”

He had listened to this last bit of the old man's banter somewhat dubiously, ascribing that particular part as being merely drunken talk designed to frighten what this old local likely perceived to be just another tenderfoot American solo traveler. Or, as he more firmly suspected, simply to just be “taking the mick,” as it was commonly known in those parts. He had humored him, but had consciously chosen not to take the old man seriously.

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Hearing all of that about fairies and hauntings had made him recall something that had happened to him once, years ago, when he was a much younger man.

It was in 1987, back when he was living in a rented house in Atlanta, Georgia, along with four roommates. They had lived there for just over a year and during that time, there were several experiences with what they later became convinced was an actual ghostly presence.

That experience had thoroughly convinced him that there really was something to the whole subject of ghosts and, afterward, he no longer dismissed similar stories that he heard from other people quite so easily. And he had often wondered afterward just what could be the forces behind such otherworldly things, whether places like old houses that had a past dark history perhaps resented the presence of living humans, whose very existence seemed to disturb the strange forces that resided there.

Still, fae folk, elves, ghosts, and bogs aside, all of this enforced the idea that such beauty as was found on the moors could be deceptive and he reminded himself to view it as both refuge and threat.

All of these dangers were on his mind as he hurried to complete this part of his hike before nightfall. And especially before the impending weather hit.

As he continued to move along, he had begun to feel somewhat disconcerted at the general bleakness of the area as it had been transformed by the coming of the storm. Because there was now a kind of heaviness in the air, and the wind continued lashing, hard enough to make him struggle to keep his balance during the stronger gusts. And the smell of the coming rain was on the wind. Part of an Emily Brontë poem, one that she had written about the Yorkshire moors, popped into his mind and he repeated the words in his head:

The night is darkening round me,
The wild winds coldly blow;
But a tyrant spell has bound me,
And I cannot, cannot go.

He shifted his pack to a more comfortable position on his back. He thought to himself how the complete aptness of those words, particularly to a man who now found himself trapped in an increasingly more concerning weather situation on the moor, seemed almost uncanny.

His deep appreciation, no, let's call it what it really was, his *absolute love*, of English classic literature, particularly that of the Brontë sisters, was, in part, the reason why he had chosen to venture here in the first place. It was through his reading of the personal experiences and rich imaginations of such Gothic writers as the Brontës that this landscape came to be so romanticized in his mind. And for most of his life, he had been attracted to that particular kind of darkness. That was partly because he understood that he had always felt lonely. But he also had come to realize that he actually found a kind of solace from immersing himself in the haunted misery that those authors wrote about. He had always felt such a strong attraction to all manner of things that others might think of as morbid, even ghoulish. Emily Brontë was the spinster daughter of a minister, but seemed to have possessed the heretical soul of a pagan, an attribute which he identified with mightily. History has referred to her as the “mystic of the moors.” And it was not lost on him that it was something more than just a little bit ironic that he had allowed himself to fall in love again, only this time, with a woman (Emily Brontë) who had been dead for 176 years. Maybe that wasn't really irony, but rather, was something quite telling about himself personally, more along the lines of, what, representing some sort of “risk-free” relationship?

But it was the only type of situation left where he still felt safe enough to give up his heart. Here, deep out on the Yorkshire moors, was where Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre had been raised on the tales from her nanny of fairies and the fae folk, those strange creatures who made their homes on the moor; the place where she had often gone to think and to examine her innermost thoughts and feelings; where the ghosts of her characters Helen Burns or Bertha Mason might wander as materialized beings or thought-forms for all eternity; and the place where Jane had fled to from Thornfield Hall, from Edward Rochester, to wander in the night without food or shelter, sleeping out in the open, and nearly succumbing to the elements.

It was that last thought that made him quicken his pace a bit more. Overhead, the sun was now completely blotted out by gray-black clouds that were racing before the wind and the smell of rain had again reached his nose. Lightening flashed and more thunder rumbled, echoing across the moors, with a discordance of sound, like that of many giants pounding on huge concert bass drums.

The storm is fast descending,

And yet I cannot go.

Not exactly the most encouraging prose to bring to mind at the moment, and certainly not while in such a situation. He thought to himself how Emily Brontë, often referred to as “the strange one” of the three Brontë sisters, had portrayed the moors as being desolate, unforgiving, even haunted.

Perhaps, he told himself, I ought to ignore such bleak poetry and what the old man in Meltham had said about the fae folk, and instead, keep in mind his warning about the bogs. Yes, he would instead try thinking of himself in a more valiant light. Perhaps as some sort of primitive and wise druid pilgrim, strolling along an ancient ley line through the moors on his way to Stonehenge, a path that would eventually lead him to the realm of the Good People, perhaps even to Oberon himself. Yes, that was much better.

Still, one did not need to be a poet or a folklorist to feel the strange ambiance of this place, impending storm or not. The moors seemed to be able to generate many varied emotions from a person: exhilaration, loneliness, yearning, expectation; and there was a definite impression of an unrepeated quality, that of nostalgia, dreams, and yes, even a hint of the possibility of things living there without form or name.

Like the fae folk, he thought.

As he continued to fumble along, lost in such thoughts, he began to shift his thinking to just *how* he had ended up here. Partly, it was because he believed that exercise and fresh air were great cures for almost anything. He had already explored many of the great hiking trails that he had cared to try in the rugged mountains of the Pacific Northwest in the United States and British Columbia. What he had really wanted was a change of scenery, as much as anything else. He had chosen England, and more specifically, Yorkshire.

But, he reminded himself, there was the *why* of his being here, too. That answer was, he understood only too well, because of failed romance. This trip was part of his attempt to distract himself from lingering bad memories and pain.

As he continued to mull it over, he thought how his last failed relationship was where he had learned that a single mistake can cost you everything that you ever worked for, fought for, or had built your life on; about how sometimes the one you love can bring about your own downfall. And while it was certainly a love story, it was one that didn't have a great ending. And definitely one where mistakes were made and lessons were learned, heavy ones that he now carried with him.

Even now, he found himself hesitating to call falling in love with someone a *mistake*. A large part of him still felt that doing so had been a truly wondrous thing at the moment that it happened. He understood all too well that humans have little control over falling in love. And as he now wandered through the heather, with the rain and icy wind beginning to suck the heat out of his body, he pondered whether or not calling it *a mistake* was the central question at the heart of his story.

But as he continued to pick his his way along over the rough ground, through the worsening storm, he knew that his tale was one that contained multiple, conflicting elements, those of love found, intense passion, rude awakenings, love rebuked, and finally to that of personal suffering on a level that he had

never experienced before. There was no hero or villain in the story. He had learned that, one way or another, passion makes fools of us all.

Her name was Dolores, “Dolly,” to her most intimate acquaintances, and he had loved her like he had never loved another person. She had been incredibly smart, generous, fun-loving, compassionate, had eyes like Elizabeth Taylor's, and a natural beauty that didn't require her to apply any makeup or to overly-adorn herself. He had been instantly attracted to all of those attributes. For him, it was a recognition that said, “I'm never going to feel the same way about anyone else.” And, perhaps most importantly, he had sensed all of the vulnerability in her, her inner fragility, and that had instantly awakened in him the innate, primal protectiveness that he felt toward all women. Only in that instance, so much more so.

And then there was this strange reaction that he had experienced with her natural body odor. It was something that he would have been too embarrassed to tell anyone about, but it had been a very real thing for him. He had been drawn to her *smell*, on some sort of genetic-level, like an animal response. Just catching a whiff of her natural scent would instantly arouse him, not simply in a sexual way, but as something much more primal. He had read somewhere once that pheromones drive this sort of chemical reaction in humans, the same way that mothers are able to distinguish the odor of their own child from that of others. He didn't understand the science behind it and such a thing had not ever happened to him with any other woman. Yet that unusual response occurred the very first time that he had met Dolores, when he had sat down next to her in a crowded room full of people and he had caught a whiff of her bodily scent. It was something like love at first sight, but instead, was based on some form of olfactory chemistry that incited an emotional effect in him. Reflecting on this phenomenon much later, he actually thought of it as something disquieting, as if it was a force that could control him on a deep level against his will; an *enchantment* of a kind that essentially rendered him somewhat powerless.

But now, in hindsight, he realized that, from the very start, he had very much been naive to just how unfavorable the conditions were for the future of their relationship. They had both been married to other people, you see. But, and there's always a *but*, he had learned far too late that he was not at all emotionally equipped to deal with such a relationship.

He was well aware that the past can be a very strange space to wander through. It is a place where you navigate by memory alone, perhaps while wondering if you are just being nostalgic for something that was never actually there; that the person that you had loved so fiercely was in fact just an illusory entity whom you had created in your head, one which had *never really existed at all*. That final thought was one which had caused him to not trust himself so much in certain areas anymore. The end result was that he had come to doubt his own ability to discern the difference between those things that were real, as opposed to that which he had created in his own mind in order to serve an emotional need. He wondered if he had become an unreliable narrator of his own past.

And perhaps, even worse, are when things that you thought were mutual and balanced turn out to be mostly one-sided, he thought. While he himself knew that he had indeed been in love with her, near the end, he had harbored real doubts about what had been truly going on in her own heart.

And when it was over, really truly *over*, the sense of betrayal he had felt had been very real. And, in spite of the love she had professed for him at the beginning, he realized that for her, it had likely only

been about the sex all along. That had been just so completely disappointing to him and he had felt the rejection intensely. For the first time in his life, he had known what it feels like to have been thoroughly used, to have been demeaned, objectified.

Still the passion he had felt for her remained, long after the romance had ended.

One of the central reasons why he had fallen so hard for Dolores was because she made him feel *seen* for the first time in over twenty years. He had spent many years prior to that feeling almost invisible, even though he had been married during that time. He and his wife had certainly had their own separate issues.

Dolores had seemed to have been the answer to a question that he didn't even know he needed to ask. But, he had allowed himself to become blinded. The truth was that they were always doomed for failure. After 18 months together, he finally began to understand, with an all too terrible clarity, that they were never going to run away together, grow old together. They both had solidly-entrenched, separate lives, and nothing was going to change that, no matter how great their passion was.

And in the end, jealousy had materialized, and it was the final blow, the *coup de grâce* to a rapidly deteriorating situation. Because it turned out that he had not been her only dirty little secret: there were *multiple such others*.

So, that realization had hurt, but he knew instinctively that he could not, would not, try to force his wants and needs onto another person. It went against the natural flow of what he believed constituted healthy love and respect. You can't blame a person for not loving you in the way that they simply cannot.

When that awful realization became known to him, he had felt, for the first time in his life, the awful, sickening, almost primal feeling that comes from experiencing *real* jealousy. And he came to know it to be an absolutely horrible thing, something that had left him totally miserable, heartsick, and angry. He remembered how that jealousy had become all-consuming, of his thoughts, his energy, and his emotions.

His marriage was soon over, too. His wife's own jealousy had flared and subsequently, they were quickly over. She had suggested the divorce and as he still cared enough about her to not want to put her through the kind of pain that such intense jealousy would continue to evoke, he had agreed.

But he had not beaten himself up too badly on that last count, as he now truly understood, perhaps more than he would have cared for, that he had not had any real control over what his heart decided to do. In the end, he had to chalk it down to being *just one of those things*.

But, sadly, it came to be that, soon after all of this had happened, his mother had become quite ill. And shortly after, she had passed away after only another year. Once again, he was heartbroken. Again on his own. Again, *lonely.*

He had borne all of that to the best of his ability, until he knew that what he most needed now was yet another change of scenery, if only a temporary one.

So, he had chosen to come to England, a country with which he had always felt a real kinship. Indeed, his family had historical English roots and relatives, and the DNA tests to confirm it. Couple that with his absolute love of English music and literature and he had no trouble convincing himself that the trip was what he needed.

He had planned his trip, researching hiking areas, places to overnight, what gear he needed to buy, and then had booked a flight to London.

After his arrival in the UK, he had stayed in London for a few days. But the thrill of the big city had lost most of its charm and excitement for him. *I'm getting too old for this now*, he thought.

So he had bought a train ticket to Meltham, took a taxi from the station when he arrived, and then had booked himself into a room at a lovely little B&B. The very next day, wanting solitude more than any company or diversion to be found in town, he had started out on his walking trip across the moors.

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He stumbled on a rock in the path, nearly fell, and that forced him out of his thoughts and back into awareness of his present situation. He had not been looking down at his feet as he picked his way over the rocky ground. And then he had felt a moist, cool breath of wind on his cheek. Soon after, the first drops of rain had begun to fall, big drops that splattered noisily on the rocks and the heath. He stopped and put on his raincoat. He shivered and thought that it was the spirit of the north wind that truly roamed these hills, lying in wait, always ready to pounce on an unwary traveler, such as himself. He was getting colder and his teeth were even beginning to chatter.

Off in the distance, he saw a flock of birds flying with the wind, likely headed to some shelter from the impending storm. They were magpies, maybe 30 or 40 of them. *One for sorrow, two for joy*, he thought to himself, repeating the old traditional rhyme in his head. He watched them until they disappeared from sight. *Seven for a secret never to be told*, he again thought, and adjusted his raincoat more closely, securing the hood over his head and tying it under his chin with a quick bow knot. He knew from experience that the behavior of birds could be a warning for things like bad weather.

In spite of the rough going, he had been making pretty good progress on covering the distance. But, he decided that now was the time that he had had better start to seriously think about relocating the main road and finding a hotel or pub to stay for the night.

He tried to quicken his pace, but the footing was extremely rugged and difficult here, more so than he had expected, actually. He stumbled over rocks and almost lost his footing several times on the rough ground and clumps of heather, an irregular surface at best, and where a step into a hole or pit could mean a twisted ankle or worse. Worse, like falling into a bog, worse.

For the past half hour, he had been working his way through a long valley that ran between two large hillocks. The path he followed ran along the edge of a stream and he saw now that the trail was leading him to the base of a very high hill on his right. With the wind and rain in his face, he began to angle off of and away from the footpath and prepared himself for a long climb up to the top. He told himself that when he got all the way up there, he would use the height advantage to see which way he should go in order to look for the road that would take him to a place to get in out of the weather.

As he veered off the path, he hooked his thumbs in his pack straps, and began to climb steadily uphill. The valley was aligned roughly east to west, and he was climbing up the hillock facing northward, the slope of the hill shielding him momentarily from the full brunt of the wind.

As he neared the top, he began to lose some of that protection and the full force of the wind slammed into him again, and he began to change his mind. He looked to his left at an outcropping of gray-black rock about three hundred feet away and he made his way partially back down the hill, where the wind was lesser, moving at a downward angle, toward the rocks.

Arriving at the cluster of rocks, he saw that one particularly large flat boulder was firmly anchored into the ground at the back, creating an overhang that jutted out over the heath and the other nearby rocks. He wondered if this might just serve as a place to get into and out of the weather.

He examined it more closely. Yes, the boulder was part of a large, flat rock where the ground underneath was hollowed out, enough so that there was an overhang, not huge, but large enough to provide something like a roof against the rain. He saw that it was dry inside. And best of all, the entrance was facing south, away from the full brunt of the north wind and foul weather that was being driven before it. The rain had continued to fall all during his climb, and detour, and was now coming down much harder. The thunder rumbled and echoed steadily overhead.

Yes, he could see that there was enough space for him to fit inside and have a modicum of headroom, but only just barely. He looked more closely, and then thought of the ancient dolmen he had seen earlier in his hike. This caused him to wonder inwardly if this might actually be a collapsed dolmen; whether the large, flat rock might have been the original capstone, and the other rocks laying nearby, the supporting columns. It was then that he had suddenly been overcome by a feeling that there was maybe something here that was more than what it seemed at first inspection. It was something indefinable to him, a feeling of wrongness, bordering almost on the otherworldly. It was such a strong sensation that he had stood there hesitating for longer than felt rational, the rain pelting down on him.

Then, another strong gust of wind drove more cold rain into his face. And he told himself he really had no other choice, did he, what with both the storm fully breaking out now and night coming on, just as quickly? Better to seek the shelter at hand, rather than risk getting soaked through and inviting hypothermia.

He mentally shook the foreboding feeling off, slung his pack onto the ground, and tried fitting himself underneath the overhang. OK, it was definitely *not* going to be very comfortable. But, he thought that he would remain relatively dry inside. Convinced, and really not having any other meaningful choices at the moment, he disregarded his earlier wariness, and then managed to scrunch himself underneath, pulling his pack in along with his body.

Now he laid there, looking out of his small shelter, listening to the wild wind and the rumbling storm high overhead, which was finally here for real now, and at its full force. The rain came down heavily now, as it and the wind raged against the moor, fighting yet again that same long and tireless battle that had been going on here between the earth and the forces of nature since time had begun to count such things.

Even though this was not at all anyone's idea of an exemplary situation, after an hour had passed, he had begun to relax. The roof overhead was keeping out the bulk of the rain. He even managed to struggle into his pack and remove a bit of bread and cheese. And he lay there, propped up on one elbow, eating, listening to the storm, and taking the occasional sip from his water bottle.

Now feeling more at ease, he again allowed his thoughts to wander. What was the strange reaction that he had felt when he was first considering this place as a shelter? He studied the inside of his little cave, at the faces of the rock walls and at the overhanging rock roof. He noted that the blueish color of these stones were vastly different from the other rock formations that he had seen along the walking path. Those stones were brown, gray, and black. It seemed likely, he now thought, that his initial reaction might have been because he had sensed, correctly, that this may indeed be some sort of old, man-made structure built by the inhabitants of long ago, perhaps by hauling the stones to this location from far away quarries to erect them here. Maybe this *was* a collapsed dolmen, an ancient tomb. The thought of that was not exactly comforting to him, but he again reminded himself that it was the emergency of the storm that had forced him to take what shelter he could find. He decided that he would have to take comfort in that. The sound of the moaning wind and driving rain outside reminded him of the simple reason why he was here, anyway.

Not long after he had finished his simple meal, he closed his eyes and began to drift a little. But as he began to feel sleep approaching, his mind again turned to the idea of his shelter being a dolmen, a tomb, and he began to liken being wedged here under the rock overhang to something like being buried. That in turn made him recall a line from a song, *Suffer Little Children*, by the English rock band, The Smiths:

Over the moor, take me to the moor
Dig a shallow grave
And I'll lay me down...

He shivered a little at the horrible thought that lyric evoked and then he could not help picturing himself dying in a place like this, lying there alone, to remain here undiscovered for days, months, years, centuries. He tried to think of more pleasant thoughts, but still the feeling the song had evoked persisted.

We may be dead and we may be gone
But we will be, right by your side...

You might sleep
But you will never dream...

He shifted his weight around, trying to find the most comfortable position. The ground under the shelter was not solid rock and having the pack under his head served as a pillow. He covered himself with the small ground cloth that he had brought along. It was waterproofed on one side, and the other side was covered with a soft fabric. It would help to keep the small amount of rain off of him that the wind blew in occasionally, while also serving as a blanket. Then, belly full, feeling somewhat safely ensconced, and lulled by the sounds of falling rain and the moaning of the wind, his eyelids grew heavier.

As he often did when he sensed that his mind was beginning to drift toward sleep, his thoughts once again turned toward Dolores and yet another song lyric from The Smiths came into his mind:

Last night I dreamt
That somebody loved me
No hope, no harm
Just another false alarm

How terribly apt is that, how completely accurate, he thought. But, as always, when thoughts of Dolores crept back in, along with the similarly disturbing, intruding thoughts of his failed marriage, his deceased mother, he tried to block them all out. He realized just how much he continued to be haunted by those thoughts, how the poison continued to seep into the wounds. Still, he allowed the rest of the song to play inside his head:

Last night I felt
Real arms around me
No hope, no harm
Just another false alarm

Thinking of those words, and listening to the wind and rain, he had eventually drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

§

Some time around 3:00 o'clock in the morning, he woke up, and, strangely, felt a sense of alarm. He could hear that the rain had stopped and, looking out through the cave opening, he saw that a thin gray mist now lay close to the ground. But it was a sense of fear that had woken him up. He continued to peer out from beneath the overhang of the rock, and to his amazement, he saw what at first looked like a dim light dancing around, down in the valley, way out on the darkened moor.

He watched it as it moved around, fascinated, seeing now that it was some sort of luminous, yellow-orange light. It looked almost like someone was out there, walking around, swinging a flickering, old-fashioned lantern from their hand.

Could that actually be somebody out walking on the moor who is lost?, he thought to himself in amazement, and his first impulse was to yell out. But something stopped him, some abrupt feeling of new dread. He realized that it was his fear. He had become overwhelmed with a deep sense of alarm, and realized that he was too scared to attempt anything and instead, cowered back deeper into his small shelter while continuing to peer out through the overhang. He watched as the light began to grow brighter, nearer, gliding around with no discernible pattern. The light would appear in one place, glimmer and bob for a few moments, and then just disappear completely, only to then instantly reappear, but now hundreds of feet away from where he had last seen it. *That's impossible*, he thought, *It can't be a person*.

He had observed this, quite amazed, and still feeling that sense of fear, for what felt like half of an hour until finally, the light begins to move away until it was out of his sight. He continued to watch for about fifteen minutes longer, but the light never returned.

Just some trick of the eyes, he thought, *maybe ball lightening, or what he had heard called a will-o'-the-wisp, or a "ghost light*." He had been amazed at the light, and definitely a bit scared; seeing something as strange as that while alone out here in the middle of the moor at night, was unnerving.

He had heard of such things before and now remembered a story that a friend of his had once told him, about a similar phenomena that was local to his friend's tiny little hometown of Surrency, Georgia. That story was about something that the locals called the "spook light," a weird, glowing orb that would sometimes appear along the same stretch of the railway line where it ran through the swamp in Surrency. His friend had related to him how one time when he was out on the train track at night, the light appeared several hundred yards in front of him, hovering over the railway. He described it as a very bright, golden-yellow light, about the size and shape of a grapefruit. And when he had tried to approach the light, it began to move toward him until it suddenly blinked out, only to reappear directly behind him, then finally, just disappeared from sight completely. Local legends held that the Surrency light was a "corpse candle," carried by the ghost of a dead railway worker who had been wicked during his life. After he had died, the Devil had given him a lantern with a single candle inside which he used to lure the unwary to drown in the nearby swamp. Remembering that story, he thought to himself that the light he had just seen on the moor was very similar in nature to what his friend had described.

He inched back into the shelter, wedging himself in as far as he could, and pulled the ground cloth back over himself, and, though he still felt an uneasy sense of something like real foreboding, he eventually, fell back to sleep.

But his sleep was troubled. And then he had been dreaming. Dreaming that he saw something else out on the moor. Not another ghost light, but instead, what looked like the pale figure of a young woman standing about twenty feet away, just outside of where he lay in his shelter. He stared at her from under his rock. She looked almost luminous under the pale moonlight. Or was that a trick of the ground mist? She was just standing there. Silent and still.

But now she was moving, coming closer, nearer to where he sheltered, no, where he was buried, buried in an old tomb. And then she was right there, bending down to look in at him as he lay there under his protective rock. In his shallow grave.

The dream was vivid. Clear. Too clear. He could actually see now what she was wearing: a pale blue woolen coat over a patterned pink and gold dress and he could see that she had on white stiletto heeled shoes that were soiled and dirty. He saw that she wore a necklace and was holding a single white glove in her hand.

Then the young woman, just a girl actually, was right there, at the opening in the rock, crouching down, speaking in to him, saying in a quiet voice, "I was sleeping and you woke me up," and after a small pause, "Please, won't you let me come in? Please. I'm so cold. They left me out here by myself. I'm all alone."

It was all so clear. He could now see that, yes, yes, this was no trick of the light, she *was* luminous. And this was a very young girl, only a teenager. A beautiful young girl. And in the depth of this dream, he had stammered out, "Who are you? What are you?", quickly followed by, "Are you a ghost?"

She was still crouched there in front of the opening, peering in at him, and her reply was soft, quiet, girlish, “No, not really, but I *am* in an odd sort of way.”

Still stammering, his alarm rising, he asked, “Wuh-what are you, then?”

“You know,” came her quiet reply. She was gazing at him almost soulfully. Her eyes were dark and wide open. And now there was a hint of a smile on her face.

Even in this dream, he instinctively tried to back away from the figure and had felt the solidness of the rock at his back. No exit there. Only one way out. He had felt himself rising into a full panic.

“Tell me,” he begged, “who are you? What are you?”

“I am you,” she whispered.

His response was instant, frantic, “No. No! I am me. You are you!”

He saw the girl's pallid face break into what looked like a sad smile and she repeated again in her childlike voice, “I am you,” a pause of seconds, and then, “I am a night watcher.”

He lay there, looking at her, now unable to speak. Her skin was pale, colorless. Her eyes were opened wide, looking directly into his own. Then, she had reached out and placed a white hand on his bare arm and he felt its icy coldness. He had jolted awake with a startled scream on his lips, striking his forehead a sharp, glancing blow on the rock roof above his head and then he frantically scrambled to get out of the shelter.

He now stood outside, shaken, looking wildly all around. Nothing. No one. The moor was empty.

Gone. The girl was gone. There was no girl.

And he had stood there, agitated, breathing hard, trying to make himself wake up, seeing now that the first light of dawn was visible in the eastern sky. He was trembling, as much from the early morning chill, as from recalling the vivid dream that had woken him up so violently, the awful touch of that icy, ghostly hand. His body felt bruised, achy, and stiff from lying on the ground in the cramped quarters, from the bump he had just taken on his head. He shivered again, feeling cold sweat on his forehead and arms. He had felt it. He had actually felt her touch his arm.

Last night I felt
Real arms around me

What the hell is going on with me?, he thought, only for that to be followed by a kind of internal, hysterical voice, one that started to explain things in simple terms: “OK, yes, let's see now, first you woke up and saw a weird dancing light out on the heath, which might have been a ghost light, no problem, and then, what, what? Yes, you fell back to sleep again, and dreamed that you were buried in a hole under some rocks on the English moor, which may have actually been the remains of an ancient burial tomb, and then the glowing ghost of a well-dressed, young waif of a girl was talking with you and wanting to climb into your hiding place to get warm. That's all. That's it, chief. Yeah, nothing to

worry about, there, pal."

I was sleeping and you woke me up
I am a night watcher

Telling himself to get a grip, he stood there for long while, trying to regain his composure. He saw a few dull stars overhead, and that yesterday's sullen sky and foul weather were gone, having been replaced by the wispy, white ground fog.

He remained outside for almost an hour, trying to pull himself together. He could not shake the feeling that something significant had been shifted here, as if some sort of key had been inserted into a strange lock, and twisted.

Finally, he had collected his things, taking a last look at his rock shelter, still feeling disoriented and very upset. Then, in the dim light of the early dawn, he shouldered his pack, and started to move across the moor, more quickly than he had before, perilous bogs and sprained ankles be damned, his mind in a kind of daze that stayed with him for a long time. He needed to find the road.

§

To his great relief, he soon crested the top of a final hill and saw that, just ahead, there at last was the proper asphalt roadway. One that ran right through the center of the moors. A safe, solid road that he hoped would take him all the way into Manchester.

Feeling relieved and thankful, he had set off for the road. Reaching it, he climbed over the low fence, and stepped onto the asphalt shoulder. He began walking at a good pace, despite the stiffness in his body from his restless night in that cramped cave on the moor. "*Not a cave. It was a dolmen. A tomb. A grave!,*" the hysterical voice again tried to tell him. He felt a strange sort of energy that seemed to be propelling him forward, something inside that was urging him to put distance between himself and that strange place on the moor. He brain was still reeling, the way an opium habituate must feel on the third day after the laudanum has run out, like he had been injected with a black poison and was now in some sort of surreal film. All ghosts are supposed to slip away with daybreak, but he felt something spectral was lingering here. The words of the old man in Meltham came back to him again:

Ya can be sure, them moors are haunted

He was now quite unsure about everything. No, he had not taken that warning seriously, he thought to himself now, and this time, it wasn't the hysterical voice speaking, but rather one of cold, sober reasoning. Yes, his past experience had convinced him that phenomena such as ghosts might be possible. But in his mind, those things only happened inside creepy old houses. Or, the hysterical voice spoke again, *to those who did not heed warnings*, followed by, *or to those who disturbed graves*.

He tried to shake off those last two thoughts. *Enough. It's just my nerves*, he thought, *only my nerves because of the weird light I saw last night. And the other thing, that girl, no, that wasn't real, it was a crazy dream. I just need food, rest, and a decent night of sleep*."

He quickened his pace over the asphalt. The ground mist had now turned into a thick, swirling fog that

only served to contribute to his sense of disorientation and unease.

§

He had been walking along the road for only a short distance when he finally saw what looked like a structure looming out of the fog up ahead and to his left. The building was situated at one corner of what he could see was a crossroad, back about fifty feet from the asphalt, and with what looked like a wide parking area between the building and the roadway. No cars or people were to be seen there, and he grew doubtful. In fact, he had not seen so much as a single passing vehicle on this road since he had set out on it.

Through the fog and mist, he could see that the structure looked quite rugged, but had been solidly-built with limestone in the same style as that of other Georgian architecture he had seen in England, and that on top, there was what looked like a gray slate tiled roof. It was so isolated here, that he wondered whether the building might be abandoned. But as he stood there observing the building, he saw that, even through the fog, there was a thin spiral of smoke rising up out of the chimney.

Relieved, he had stepped off the road and walked quickly across the grass and gravel of the car park. The ground fog had become even thicker here and the building was almost obscured, seeming to almost float in and out of his vision. He still felt disoriented from last night and the fog did nothing to improve on that. Once he had gained the building, the fog had become so thick that he had to actually feel his way along the outside walls in order to locate an entry door. After he cautiously felt along the walls, his hand finally brushed across a sturdy oak door and he saw one of those old fashioned brass and onyx door handles. He pushed down the handle and stepped inside.

The light was dim inside, but he saw that this was indeed a pub. And quite an aged one, easily hundreds of years old. The inside was adorned in what was likely the original wood paneling, including a long mahogany serving bar that ran across almost the entire left side of the interior. He could feel heat from a warm fire that was burning in the fireplace, as the morning was chill. It smelled faintly of peat and felt wonderful to him after a chilly night spent huddled under a rock out on the moor. He began to relax a little.

He walked hesitantly down a narrow foyer which opened into the pub proper and as he approached the front of the bar, he saw a man standing behind what looked like an old fashioned cash drawer and register. The man there was an elderly gentleman, with bushy white hair that hung almost to his shoulders and sporting a thick, white beard of the same color. He was rather short and stout and was busy with a towel in his hand, polishing a pint glass. He was wearing a red woolen flat cap on his head and had on one of those old-fashioned blouse shirts made from linen under a gray jacket and matching vest. He was also wearing what looked like baggy breeches held up by braces.

The man casually looked up, seemingly not surprised to see him at such an early hour, and then smiled warmly, nodded, and said, “Aye, we have a place for ya,” in response to his question about the availability of lodging and possibly getting a room.

“Is this your pub?,” he had asked the old man, to which he received another “aye,” followed by, “Aye, aye, 'tis. I'm the inn keeper. M' name's Robin.”

The pub owner didn't offer his hand. He looked around quickly and saw that there was no one else inside. They were alone together.

Robin had resumed his polishing of the pint glass and then, feeling more relieved, an acute need to talk to someone, anyone, about what he had gone through yesterday and last night, came over him. He began to tell the old inn keeper the story of where he had just come from and finished by asking him where he was now.

Robin listened as he continued his work, and when the question was asked, his reply was quiet and even in tone, saying, “Well, you've just come off o' Saddleworth Moor. Off the moor proper, mind ya, as this here pub is situated on the same ground.”

Robin was looking at him now with a cocked eyebrow, as if urging him to continue and, even more relieved to actually have someone's ear, he breathed a bit easier. He took off his backpack, and lowered it to the floor, and then began to unload with his story. He proceeded to tell Robin about his journey from Meltham, the sudden, terrible storm, and the unusual place where he had been forced to shelter for the night. And while he had been hesitant at first, he then proceeded to also tell him all about the weird dancing light that he had seen out there in the dark, only choosing to leave out the part that included the dream about the strange girl.

When he had finished speaking, he couldn't help but notice that, after hearing his story, Robin's whole demeanor transformed, changing from his earlier quiet politeness as he listened, to something that now took on a look and tone of concern. Robin had put down his towel and pint glass, then pointed a finger at him and said, “The truth is, mate, ya shouldna have been out on the moors after dark, at all. There's proper danger out there, ya know, the kinda stuff you have no idea about.”

And after a quick beat, Robin finished his short speech with, “You're an American, ain't ya?” It had been more of a direct statement, than a question.

“Yes, I am,” he had replied, feeling a bit taken aback by Robin's sudden change in demeanor.

“Well,” Robin began, “I'm askin' 'cause that area where ya said ya spent the night last night has a bad reputation. Everyone 'round about here knows of the place and they avoid it. It's very close to where the bodies of a lot of murder victims were buried. Murdered children, mind ya. Have ya ever heard of Ian Brady and Myra Hindley? The Moors murderers?”

“Yes” he had replied, stammering, not able to hide his shock and astonishment, “I've read about those murders, but I certainly had no idea where the victims had been buried, no.”

“Right,” Robin continued on, “the very first victim of Brady and Hindley were a young lass, only sixteen years old, name o' Pauline Reade. She were brutally violated and then murdered up there on Saddleworth Moor and then she were buried right where she'd fell, in the heath, in a shallow grave up there. And, judging by what ya 'ave told me, I'd say 'twas pretty close to where ya said you holed up for the night.”

Robin paused and laid down his towel to pick up another glass and said, “And that girl that you saw last night was her ghost.”

He flinched a little when Robin spoke this last part, and he half-turned to face him where he stood behind the bar and said, “I beg your pardon?”

Robin smiled and spoke again, "I asked, would you like some tea and toast?"

He continued to stare wide-eyed at Robin for another brief second before stammering out, “No. No, no, thank you. I've already eaten.”

Robin then said mildly, “You lie, You have not.”

Still staring at Robin, rooted to the spot, he again stammered out, “W-what did you say?”

Robin was looking down at the work in his hands now and spoke again, "I just said, last July was hot."

Robin was smiling gently as began to polish a new glass, and he continued right on with his earlier narrative, unperturbed, “But now that light, that kind of 'willo-the-wisp' thing that ya say ya saw,” Robin continued, picking up his towel and glass again, “now that's known 'round here, too, for sure. 'Tis a right bad omen. A spirit o' one of the dead. In these parts, we call 'em the night watchers.”

And as he had finished saying this, he noticed that there was now this curious little smile on Robin's face. And then he had felt something truly strange. He sensed that this man somehow knew what was really in his head and it gave him the same kind of foreboding feeling, that same sense of uncanniness he had experienced when he had discovered that little hollow in the rocks out on the moor.

Who are you?
I am you.
I am a night watcher.

And then Robin was saying, “What I'm trying to tell ya is, ya shouldna gone mucking about out there on them moors, not if you don't want to stir up the wrong kind of trouble, the wrong kind of things. Are you getting' my drift, lad?”

Robin was looking at him again, only now his small smile had been replaced with a neutral face. And he also saw that there was an intensity in the old man's eyes, his gray eyes, that spoke more than any words could. And even though Robin's accent was broad, he had noticed how he had put a real emphasis on the word “things” when he had spoken it. And hearing this, he again remembered the warning he had been given by the other old man in the Meltham pub, about the fae folk and weird creatures of the night who roamed out on the moors.

Them moors are haunted

And that made him think suddenly of the ghost girl from his dream.

But his thoughts were interrupted as Robin had begun to speak again, now almost sounding condescending, like he was explaining something to a child. And his accent had changed, too, losing its regional Yorkshire lilt, now sounding more proper, almost scholarly. Robin had walked out from behind

the bar until he was standing within arms length to him and began to talk, saying, “Be sure of this. Wherever there is corruption, wickedness, and madness, any of the most base weaknesses and foibles of human beings, certain things are allowed to hold sway over the earth, places like the moors. These things, they feed off of all that and as a result, are given dominion. And those who are the most unwary,” Robin continued, his voice now rising and taking on a more strident tone, “the ones who seem to be drawn to such things, the ones who go about stirring things up. Well, it creates an almost perfect confluence. You might even call it a corroboration. When you notice them, they become aware that you have noticed them. The end result, of course, being the weighty consequences of one's own actions, often served up as a cupful of grue.” He had finished and was still holding his gaze. An uncomfortable gaze.

The atmosphere inside the pub now seemed very close to him, stifling, claustrophobic. There was an almost unnatural silence. He could hear the ticking of an old clock on the wall in the foyer, could hear his own pulse as it throbbed in his temples. He could smell dust, old leather, wood oil, decay. Even the dim light inside the room seemed to be fading.

Breaking his eyes away from Robin, who was still standing there with that same flat expression on his face, he now had the sudden urge to flee. And he did just that, turning away, and fumbling out of the door, bumping a shoulder on the jamb as he careened out. He stumbled his way through the fog over the gravel parking area to draw up by the side of the road.

But he was now puzzled by the road. What had previously been a modern, solid asphalt surface, now appeared to be paved with some sort of flagstone or cobblestones and he saw that there was now a signpost there that he hadn't noticed earlier. It read: *Eternity Crossroads*. A sense of having stepped into some new unreality was now added to his anxiety and confusion.

He stood there, his back to the pub, looking at the road, the sign, then out over the moor. He saw that, across the road, a small flock of birds, black and white magpies, were perched on the roadside fence. As he looked at them, he again remembered the lines from the nursery rhyme, which that hysterical voice began to recite in his head:

One for sorrow,
Two for joy,
Three for a girl,
Four for a boy

And even as he was hearing that voice, more magpies arrived and landed on the same fence with the others, and he continued to count them all, for a total of thirteen. He remembered part of the last stanza of the rhyme:

Eleven for health,
Twelve for wealth,
Thirteen beware it's the devil himself.

Thirteen magpies. There were thirteen magpies now perched on the fence.

He had spun around quickly then and looked back at the door of the pub where Robin was now

positioned. He was standing there, looking out at him where he stood by the road, the now changed road, counting the birds. Robin was again smiling that strange little smile, the gray fog swirling around him.

Thirteen beware it's the devil himself.

And it was at that same moment that he noticed, for the first time, that there was also a signboard above the door to the pub, hanging just above Robin's head, a sign that proclaimed the pub's name in bold type: *The Powrie Inn*.

And then, seeing that he had finally noticed both the road sign and the pub signboard, that he finally was beginning to *understand*, Robin's smile turned into a wide grin, and in a loud, mocking, falsetto voice that mimicked a female American New Englander accent, he repeated aloud a stanza from a poem:

If I pay the roots of the heather
Too close attention, they will invite me
To whiten my bones among them

"Yes," he said when he had finished, "Dear Ms. Sylvia Plath, lovely, lovely girl, she was entranced by the moors, too," Robin said, still smiling. "She absolutely fell in love with this place! Wrote some wonderfully dark poetry about the moors. And guess what? They eventually found her dead in her London flat with her head inside a gas oven." His broad Yorkshire accent had completely vanished now. "Yes, she also liked to stir things up."

Stirring things up
Just one of those things

The fog had thickened even more, now almost completely obscuring everything around the pub from sight. The magpies were still perched on the fence, their small shapes barely discernible in the fog; they were just sitting there; static, soundless, foreboding.

"As I'm sure you are now quite aware," Robin continued, his voice again neutral, "you should be very careful of the people and things that you choose to love, what you *wish* for. What strange attractions you allow yourself to cultivate. It can all lead you to your ruin. And I know that you lied to me earlier, a lie by omission, for sure, but still a lie all the same, about your meeting with young Pauline last night on the moor. You woke her up. Asked her questions. Did she give you the answers you were looking for?"

I was sleeping and you woke me up

"Who are you?," he was shouting at Robin now, the timbre of his own voice now much higher in pitch. He could hear his fear and anxiety in it, his stammering quaver. But, what he really wanted to ask, what he was now too terrified to say aloud, was, "And where are we right now, right at this very moment?"

The fog had become thicker and thicker, swirling silently, whirling in ghostly eddies; it had brought visibility down to less than thirty feet in any direction; it was in his nostrils; humid, acrid, cloying. The

smile had dropped completely from Robin's face and now they were both stood there, locked in each other's gaze. He tried to drag his eyes away from Robin's glittering, unblinking stare, but he somehow felt frozen, locked in place, in some sort of paralysis, the way prey feels in the presence of an apex predator. He was conscious now that he was forcing himself to control his breathing, so as to not begin hyperventilating.

Robin's reply to his last question was simple, as he smiled again and said, “I'm pretty sure that you are starting to figure that one out for yourself, now aren't you?”

I love these moors. I wish that I could live here forever

And then something popped into his head: he remembered an episode of that old television show, *The Twilight* Zone, he had once seen, about this man, this traveler who had gotten lost while hiking through the countryside in Europe. The lost traveler had stopped at this old, isolated monastery to ask for help, and, he unwittingly released the Devil himself from a jail cell where he had been imprisoned for ages by the group of monks who lived there, effectively allowing ultimate evil to again run loose in the world. He remembered that the moral of the story was something about how it was the inability of humans to recognize evil in its many guises that has always been mankind's greatest weakness. That European traveler had most definitely stirred things up, too.

Thirteen beware it's the devil himself

Yes, he was certainly beginning to understand. And he could feel that the blood was draining from his face. He could feel himself going numb, as if wrapped in a cold shell, but still conscious of what was going on around him.

Still standing by the pub, Robin saw that he understood everything now, too, and with a wave of his arm toward the birds on the fence, he said, “Yes, yes, the magpies think they know my name, and what troublesome, interfering little creatures they are.” “But,” he continued, “just ignore them. They're tricksters, one and all. I'm the true manager in this region and I say that we have room for you here,” he said, now giving a slightly sinister-sounding chuckle, along with a sardonic smile. “Why don't you come back inside by the fire? Where it is warm.”

He had come here, he now thought, seeking solace on the moors from all of his troubles, but the only thing that now kept repeating over and over in his brain was the old cliché, “Out of the frying pan, into the fire.”

Out of the frying pan
Into the fire
Out of the frying pan
Into the fire

Into the fire...

Thick fog had now completely obscured everything, including the pub, the fence, the birds, even the moor. Its envelope had produced a profound silence, as the world around him turned grayer and grayer. Now all he could see through the gray mist was Robin's intense staring gaze which never left his own

eyes. Robin had stepped away from the pub door and begun slowly walking toward where he stood by the road, as if he was coming down a long gray hallway, his hand outstretched to him, palm up, his voice now almost gentle, saying quietly, soothingly, “Relax, relax! You are no trespasser here. Your heathen soul makes you a coveted possession, a true object of desire. You've found a genuine liminal space. The secret commonwealth. The Seelie and Unseelie Courts! You are home, now. You are home. And I think you know that.”

But a tyrant spell has bound me,
And I cannot, cannot go

He still felt frozen. It was as if he was back inside of the collapsed dolmen, the solid rock at his back again, with no way to retreat. *Only one way out*, was his thought.

Now, in something like a dream state, he forced himself to start moving, slowly walking forward, toward Robin. And as he came nearer, he saw that a young girl was now standing just behind Robin, peeking over his left shoulder. She smiled shyly at him. He stopped dead in this tracks. It was the girl from last night's dream. Pauline. It was Pauline Reade. And now he saw that behind Pauline's own shoulder, through the foggy murkiness, that there were *other* figures standing in the dim glow; many, many other similarly pale and luminous faces, all formed up in a long, uneven line, like pallid reflections in some ghostly hall of mirrors. And he could see that those figures were stretched far back down the length of the long gray corridor, into an infinite nothingness of thick fog. His breath caught in his throat.

Somewhere off in the distance a fox screeched and barked. The fog continued to roll in across the moor on silent currents of air; silky breezes that created tiny little ripples on the face of its waters, nudging along the top of its surfaces, elements that have been part of the landscape for thousands and thousands of years.

Because the moors are ancient and have always closely embraced its own, even after death. There are many secrets held in its primeval stone structures, inside the hollow pagan burial mounds, in the *very ground* that holds and guards these and other nameless, dark things. Things that are imbued with the compelling power of *glamour.* Things that are *captivating.*

Like the night watchers.

The End.

About the Author

Curt Rowlett is a researcher and writer with a penchant for the mystical, mysterious, and macabre. His work has appeared in the books *Popular Paranoia*, *Labyrinth13: True Tales of the Occult, Crime & Conspiracy, The Curse of Palmyra Island*, *Riding On Your Fears*, and the magazines *Fortean Times*, *Strange Magazine*, *Paranoia*, and *Steamshovel Press*.

He is also: a former merchant marine who has traveled all over the world, a rock musician, a retired criminal law paralegal, and a genuine southern gentleman.